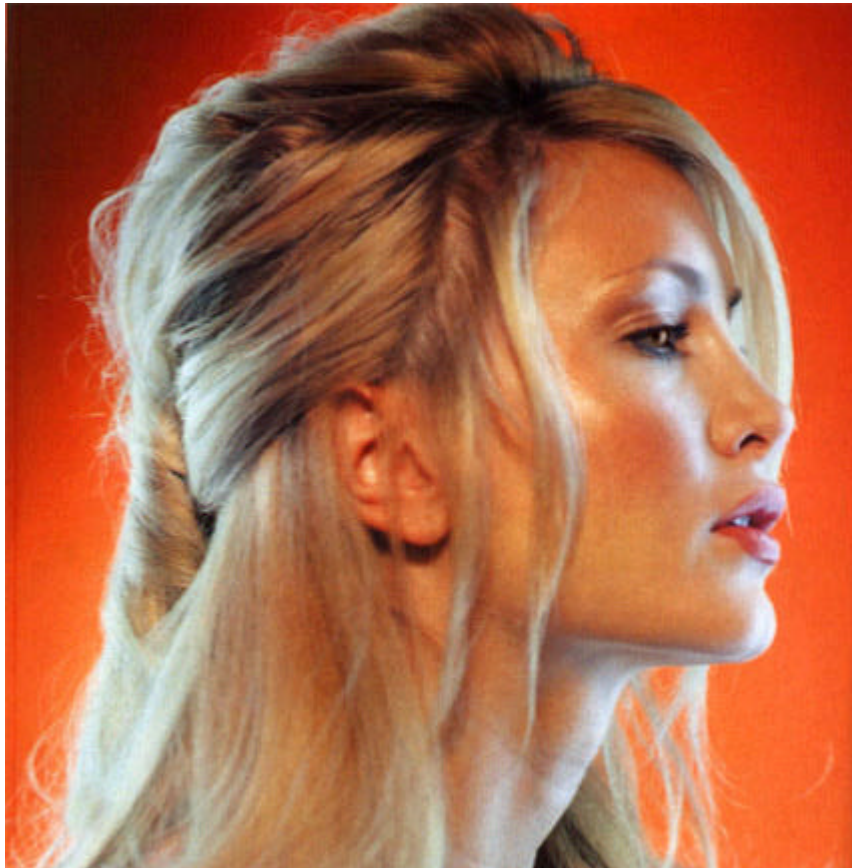


# The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four V - Part 1: Heredity

by The Space Witches



Demon with her new look.

## Chapter 1

June 2274

"Please, Daddy? Oh, go on, please, please, please?"

I looked down into my five-year-old son's golden-brown eyes and found my resolve melting away. Deborah may insist that he has my eyes, but to me, when Marcus puts on that puppy-dog pleading look, he looks just like his mother. And when was the last time I was able to say 'no' to her?

I sighed deeply. "You don't really want to do this, do you?" It was more of a statement than a question. It was met with a vehement nodding that shook golden blond curls violently. At least Deborah couldn't blame me for those. Our son had inherited those curls from his mother, no doubt about that.

In most other respects, he's pretty much a blend of the two of us, physically. He's tall for his age and built on the skinny side of normal, but he's a tough little tyke, bounding full of health and energy. Being left to baby-sit Marcus while his mother went shopping with Mattie and the nanny was no joke. It could be exhausting work trying to keep up with our son.

But for now, he was sitting perfectly still, the usual tornado of activity blessedly quiet while he used all his powers of persuasion and manipulation on me. He gets those from his mother, too.

I shook my head. "You only want to do this because your mother said 'no'. Admit it."

A mischievous smile flickered across Marcus' face and I knew I'd hit the nail on the head. Nothing is quite as attractive as that which has been forbidden. OK, so he gets that particular trait from me. I don't like rules, regulations and prohibitions any more than Marcus does. I'd never quite understood why Deborah was so vehemently opposed to this anyway, so just for once--OK, for the first time that day, anyway--I folded and agreed.

My acquiescence was met with a smile so wide it lit up the rather dark living room. It was a typical English June day outside: wet. It had been raining all night and looked as if it would continue all through the day, hence Marcus and I were shut up indoors, looking for something to while away the hours.

"OK. Here's how it goes..."

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An hour later, Marcus had got to grips with all my instructions and was ready for his first attempt. I decided to go easy on him the first few times. He's only a kid after all. One part of me said it shouldn't make any difference; I should give it him straight. After all, no one else would give him any breaks. The rest of me said to stop being a jerk and remember he's only five years old. Just for once, the nice guy won out and the jerk slunk off, muttering mutinously. I knew he'd be back. It was just a matter of time.

"Ready? Do you think you've got it?"

Marcus nodded seriously, then looked down at his hands, which struggled to control what I'd given him. For a moment, I wondered if I should just reach out and help him, then sternly told myself he had to learn. Anyway, when I moved in his direction he sat back abruptly, glaring at me and growling. He gets that from his mother.

I looked down at my own hand and hid an inner smile. Is it bad for a father to feel good when he knows he's about to beat the pants off his son? Don't answer that.

Before I could say another word, Marcus looked up at me, narrowed his eyes--he gets *that* from me--and threw his cards on the table.

"I fold." To hear those words coming out in my son's high pitched voice was a little bizarre.

"Are you sure? We haven't even started playing yet." I was checking to make sure he understood the rules, of course. It had nothing to do with the three Kings I held in my hand, and me wanting to play them. Absolutely nothing at all.

Marcus shook his head, and his face assumed a stubborn expression. "I didn't like those cards. They weren't nice ones."

I wondered for a moment what cards Marcus might classify as 'nice'. He'd shown much more interest in the picture cards than the number ones, but he was able to count quite well, so he understood that tens were higher than twos and so on. It was possible of course that he still hadn't grasped that aces were high. His problem, not mine.

I shrugged and reached for the discards, and spent a few minutes showing Marcus a range of different shuffles. He found that quite interesting, but soon admitted that the cards were too big for his small hands. "But my hands will grow, won't they, Daddy? And then I can learn to shuffle just like you. Will you teach me that one where you get the pretty ladies to go up your sleeve?"

I froze in mid-shuffle and glared at my son. I was about to deny that I would ever do such a thing, then I realized it was pointless. My son can spot a lie a mile away. He gets that from his mother, too.

Dealing another hand, I kept silent, but noticed that Marcus was watching my hands carefully. The little bastard didn't trust me! For a moment, I could hardly contain my pride. [That's my boy!]

This time, the cards weren't so kind. A pair of Jacks and a pair of fours is respectable, but nothing to write home about. I put a matchstick in the center of the table, and waited while Marcus perused his cards. I noticed that he didn't sort them, just like I'd taught him. You can give too much away from how you move your cards around when you sort your hand. Always better just to look at them, then leave them alone.

Marcus slowly picked up a single matchstick and placed it in the pot. Then he pushed five more after it. That little angelic face looked up at me, his big brown eyes twin pools of innocence. I should have quit right then and there.

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By the time another hour had gone by I was broke. Marcus had the whole pile of matchsticks in front of him, and I was committed to doing all his chores around the house for the next week. Don't ask me how he'd wheedled me into that one. I'm too embarrassed to tell you.

I was about to tell him that it really wasn't polite to gloat so openly after you've cleaned your opponent out, when we both froze at the sound of the door opening behind me. We'd been so engrossed in the game that neither of us had heard Deborah's car pulling up outside, although it's possible that the driving rain and howling wind--I do love English summers--had deafened us.

It was too late to hide the incriminating evidence, so I turned to face my wife as she walked across the room. As always, watching Deborah walk toward me was a sight for sore eyes. We were having a few ups and downs around then, and I wasn't exactly delighted about the amount of time she was spending working with her literary agent, planning her book tour, but I still thought she was the most beautiful woman in the galaxy.

Deborah had completely recovered from the injuries inflicted by Galen during his attack on her

the previous year, and she moved easily across the room toward us, her hips swinging from side to side in a motion that always raised my temperature. She was experimenting with straightening her hair around then, and the way she'd tied it back showed her cheekbones and jaw to advantage. She wore black jeans and boots against the weather, and her black v-neck sweater clung to her breasts, showing just enough cleavage to make my pulse beat a little faster. I could only hope that she'd assume that the sudden start I gave, and the flush on my face, was lust rather than guilt.

Not a hope in hell.

Deborah walked over to the table and looked down at the cards, her face completely impassive. Then she sighed, leaned forward and kissed me gently on the cheek, saying softly, "I told you not to try to teach him poker." Her tone was regretful rather than angry.

I gave her my best puppy-dog smile, the one that always brings her around. Hell, if it works for Marcus, I don't see why I shouldn't use it, too! "He asked politely, so..."

Before I could finish, Deborah perched on the arm of my chair and looked across at Marcus, frowning. She nodded at his pile of matchsticks, then asked, "What else did you take him for?"

Marcus squirmed a bit under his mother's disapproving glower, but eventually admitted to the chores issue. I can't blame him. I would have caved a damn site quicker than he did, if she'd been looking at me like that.

Deborah sighed again and patted my shoulder. "Never mind, Matthew. Marcus will do his own chores, won't you, Marcus?"

My son looked rebellious for a moment, then nodded sheepishly, before scooting out of the room as if the hounds of hell were on his tail. Well, maybe just one bitch, but a very pretty one. She can chase my tail anytime she wants.

Deborah slid off the arm of the chair and onto my knee, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me passionately, before leaning back and grinning at me. I settled her into a more comfortable position--my wife is a big girl; if I don't get her positioned right, my legs go to sleep--then I tucked an errant curl behind her ear.

"What are you grinning at? It's not funny, you know. I've just been subjected to a humiliating defeat by your son."

Deborah laughed and kissed me again, then said, "Of course he's *my* son. Why do you think I told you not to teach him? He can read you like a book! He knows exactly when you're happy with the cards you've been dealt, and when you're not. And don't even think about dealing to him from a stacked deck; he'll be onto you in seconds."

I decided not to tell her that I'd tried that one, and she was absolutely right.

"So how did you know he'd be such a demon poker player?" I teased her by using her nickname. Demon mother, demon son. It figured.

"Because while you were away sorting out that problem for Angel last month, I thought I'd see if Marcus liked playing cards. I thought as we're both empaths, it would even the odds. I was

wrong. He cleaned me out, then I ended up doing his chores for a week."

I burst out laughing and kissed her quickly. "Maybe he's *my* son after all. He never let on that he already knew how to play. I'm proud of the little bastard."

Deborah chuckled softly. "He's definitely *our* son, and as you eventually--albeit under the threat of my sisters' wrath and shotguns--did right by me, and married me, I'm not sure he's technically a bastard any more. Whatever he is, I think he's got the best and the worst of both of us. If he's like this at the age of five, God help the universe when he grows up."

I kissed my wife again and said, "I think we did good, don't you? The universe will just have to look out for itself."

So if in around ten years time, you come across a tall, good looking kid on the skinny side of normal, with big brown eyes and blond curls, who claims he's never played poker before, watch out. It could be my son. The one who takes after me.

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